

The Autobiographical (P)Act: Agency, Acceptance and the Politics of Remembrance in the Lives of Kanan Devi and P.K. Rosy

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Abstract

*Philippe Lejeune theorised the "autobiographical pact": an implicit contract of trust between the author and the reader. This paper will argue that while Kanan Devi, a celebrity actress of early Bengali cinema, could successfully forge this pact with her audience, the social order violently prevented P.K. Rosy, the heroine of the first Malayalam cinema, from even entering into such an agreement. It positions Kanan Devi's autobiography, *Sabaray Ami Nomi* (Homage to All), as a strategic act of self-fashioning. She navigated the complex terrain of gender, class, and respectability in mid-20th century India. Juxtaposing her narrative of success with the violent erasure of P.K. Rosy, whose story exists only as a reconstructed counter-memory, the paper draws on feminist life-writing theory, performance studies, and subaltern studies. It argues that the ability of an actress to author her own life (Agency in this context) was contingent on important variables such as her social location, the position of cinematic art in the cultural milieu and the roles they get to bring to life on screen. While Kanan Devi could leverage the autobiographical form to cement her legacy and claim agency, P.K. Rosy's story exemplifies the silencing of a subaltern voice, revealing how caste hierarchies dictated not only who could appear on screen but who was permitted to have a story at all.*

The autobiography of a film actress is a site of complex negotiation. It is at once a performance of charisma and a dispelling of it; a shedding of acts and a testimony of acting; a narrative of the construction of a celebrity persona and a claim towards an authentic self. In the context of Indian cinema, especially its inchoate phase, where female performers navigated a confused cartography of adoration and social censure, the act of writing one's life story was freighted with particular significance. These narratives are not merely chronicles of fame; they are telling documents that reveal the

gender dynamics of their time, illuminating the struggles for agency, legitimacy, and selfhood waged by a class of women who were constantly in the public eye.

This paper addresses this layered domain by focusing on two foundational figures from the early era of Indian cinema. The first is Kanan Devi (1916-1992), the first "superstar" of Bengali cinema, whose autobiography *Sabaray Ami Nomi* (1973) stands as a landmark text of actress-autobiographies. It is the first of such to have come up in Indian cinema history. Later works like *Bonding: A Memoir* (by Vyjayanthimala) or

The Hit Girl (by Asha Parekh) have followed Kanan Devi's techniques of self-representation of an actress in their textual consciousness. To an extent, other female performers such as Padma Subrahmanyam (in her autobiography, *Padmadalam* published in 2018) are also seen to be using the representational strategies that Kanan Devi pioneered - with narrative stress on one's affinity towards higher arts (than Cinema), with cautious omissions of potentially controversial names, with focus on one's linear progress towards altruistic ends. Devi herself did not have a previous indigenous reference point for autobiographising her career and persona. Her narrative used the tradition and templates of history, poetry, storytelling and screen-writing, among others, to put together an autobiography. In her introduction to the book, Kanan Devi gives her autobiography, a flat disclaimer: "I don't possess the audacity to write an autobiography. My humble request to my readers is not to see this attempt as one." (2) She says further that she is not interested in describing incidents, but the truth that the "garbage of events" conceal. However, in describing the truth sans the garbage of events she was laying the foundations for popular actress biographies and self-construction in the days to come. Throughout the body of Devi's autobiography there is a visible tension between belonging to the man-oriented system and resisting it to create a professional identity of one's own. Devi crafts a narrative of her journey from a background of social precarity and practical illiteracy to the pinnacle of cinematic stardom, asserting her personal dignity, work identity and demanding her due.

The second figure is P.K. Rosy (c. 1903-1988), the first female lead in Malayalam cinema and a woman from the Dalit (Pulaya) community. Her story is in many senses an antithesis of Kanan Devi's: she has no autobiography. Rosy becomes the prototype of the non-charismatic women in Indian cinema, the minor and forgotten heroines whose stories are neither written nor even actively imagined. Historically, Rosy's acting debut in the silent film *Vigathakumaran* (1928) provoked a violent upper-caste backlash in Travancore that forced her into a lifetime of exile and anonymity. Rosy and her family were driven out from the state of Travancore following the riots that the film's

release caused. The career and the life present us with an unwritten text, a history from below pieced together decades later by feminist activists and historians. Unearthed from the ruins of historical memory, her story is more of an archaeology than autobiography. The story nevertheless has some uncomfortable similarities with the narrative graph of the autobiography of Kanan Devi. Both of them essayed on screen roles of women who were above their social standing. Devi suffered and plod through the exploitative and narcissistic male world of early Bengali cinema which gave her an obsession on winning *bhadralok* respectability. Rosy enacted in *Vigathakumaran* the role of Sarojini, a Nair housewife. This was transgression and pollution in the eyes of the caste-patriarchy complex of early 20th century Kerala. Like Kanan loved music more than cinema, Rosy was fascinated with the folk theatre form called *Kakkarissi* drama. The *Kakkarissi* platform required the actresses to sing. Rosy was good at the art of singing too. Their careers however diverged into two very dissimilar endings: Devi won civilian awards and recognitions and died a movie veteran's death. Rosy married a truck driver, changed her name to Rajamma, and died unknown, far from home, in Nagercoil.

A comparative reading of Kanan Devi's authored life and P.K. Rosy's erased one should begin with the stratified nature of agency for women in early Indian cinema. The ways how Kanan Devi would skillfully use the autobiographical form to fashion a legitimate public self, and the means by which the structures of a casteist society denied P.K. Rosy the possibility of such a narrative makes the construction of 'celluloid self' a forked activity. The creation and memorialization of an actress's self are contingent not on talent or fame, but fundamentally on her handling of the structures of local patriarchal hegemonies that define the cinema of her time. This may be taken as an extension of the general complications associated with women-authored biographies. The focus on public achievements and professional lives in men's autobiographies allow for 'a linear and self-aggrandizing narrative of success', in male autobiographers. In contrast women's autobiographies are more personal,

focusing on domestic life, relationships, and the private sphere.¹ It is also often found that the narrative form of women's autobiographies is often disjunctive, rather than linear and chronological. Going by this general logic, one could say, Devi was putting together a woman's autobiography that played down the offices, contracts and public successes. Her vision is turned inward. There is more ink spent in *Sabarey Ami Nomi* on the elaboration of the author's states of mind and immediate emotional world, than the laurels and recognitions she won in her career. It should also be remembered that she opted to side with music as the art of her choice despite the fact that it was cinema that brought her celebrity status.

This is not to say that the Bengali super star had everything going in her favour. Mimi Bhattacharya has observed how despite Devi's fame and reputation, Heramba Chandra Maitra, her father-in-law, thought very low of the actress and used every opportunity to condescend on her person and profession. Devi had also had to struggle and make her way through the thicks of an early Indian Savarna patriarchal context. But the fact that she could finally have a story to tell puts her at a different end of the spectrum occupied by India's early actresses who generally were all but erased from the local cinematic history.

So far in indigenous feminism, there are no theoretical frameworks to understand an actress's autobiography. The genre of autobiography itself is inherently performative² where the writer is both the narrator and the protagonist, the creator and the created. For an actress, this performativity is twofold: her life is already a public performance, and her autobiography becomes another stage on which to shape her persona. Erving Goffman, talking about "the presentation of self in everyday life" mentions how in life-narratives one tends to project one's own ideals of social iconicism. (Goffman, 14) This would make a celebrity autobiography a meticulously managed front-

stage performance, designed to project a specific, often idealized, image to an audience. Feminist critiques of life-writing, such as Estelle Jelinek's, have noted how relationships and personal connections contribute more to women's autobiographies than the common sense about life-success. (13) Domna Stanton also theorizes the "relational self" of women autobiographers ('autogynographers', to use Stanton's term) set on personal and subjective understandings since 'common sense' is largely a patriarchal field of signs. (Stanton, 52) Success and failure of Indian mass cinema is aligned with market-place patriarchy. Actresses who write their story, in this context, construct their identities balancing their professional achievements with their roles as daughters or wives, and mothers - in a sense, this is their best bet to acceptability and validation, since there is a general devaluing of the womanly self as far as an actress in an Indian commercial film is concerned. In another sense, this is the actress's second-stage conformation to societal expectations, the first being her cinematic roles written in the line of patriarchal stereotypes and consumed by a largely male audience. An autobiography is, in this respect, an actress's representational technique towards realising a desirable subject-hood.

The "technologies of self-representation" is a key idea. Leigh Gilmore would identify the genre of autobiography itself as a technology of self-representation: a mediated, historically and socially situated system of conventions, instead of an essential self. She introduces categories like self-invention, self-discovery, and self-representation as modes by which women have historically constructed their narrative selves.³ These are not passive reflections but active interventions in cultural scripts that traditionally exclude or misrepresent marginalized identities. Marginalized writers, especially women, contest dominant norms by "writing themselves into" texts via re-membering: reclaiming forgotten or silenced histories and contexts. This counters the gendered violence of

¹ See. Jelinek, Estelle C., editor. *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*. Indiana University Press, 1980. Pp 12-13.

² See Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. University of Minnesota Press, 2010. Pp 1-2.

³ See Gilmore, Leigh. *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*. Cornell University Press, 1994. Pp 23-24

traditional autobiography, which is not comfortable with such voices. There are, for instance, "limit-cases", to use Gilmore's term, where autobiographical form, for women, blends with fiction, or history, or theory. This hybridization becomes a technique to represent memory and identity in ways that androcentric, chrono-logical autobiographies cannot sustain. It allows for a dismissal of common sensical definitions of what is a successful social self, and provokes a womanly search for the meaning of success and acceptance.

An actress's life works within an elaborate narrative machinery that involves gossip columns, interviews, and the narratives of the characters she realises on screen. Her *technology* of self-representation, the technique of autobiographising, is a limit-case that calls forth blending of genres of literary fiction, autobiography and narratives from the cinematic sub-culture. *Sabaray Ami Nomi* needs to be read in this light. The book is way different from and way more than a traditional autobiography; it is an autogynography re-memembering the traditional form. Its "autobiographics" involve the complex assimilation of Bhadrakol moral codes, Bengali commercial cinema's narrative machinery, an artist's growth-narrative, and a sense of beginning, middle and end.

Born into uncertain circumstances and entering the film industry as a child actor without formal training, Devi faced the dual stigma of being a woman in a "disreputable" profession and lacking the pedigree of the Bhadrakol who constituted the industry's gatekeepers and primary audience. Her narrative goes on to become then, a narrative of legitimation. Like in a cleverly written bildungsroman, charting her rise through talent, hard work, and an unwavering commitment to her art, Kanan Devi's narrative strategically refuses to become the whistleblower. She does recount instances of sexual harassment and professional sabotage, but narrates them without naming the perpetrators and soon identifies the incidents as systemic obstacles rather than personal assaults. She describes one such instance earlier in the book:

A studio take was in process. I spoke my piece as rehearsed. At

the end of the scene, the hero suddenly hugged and kissed me in the manner of English films. I was stunned by the suddenness of the act. It took time for me to recover. When I had pulled myself together, shock, pain, humiliation, resentment and sorrow for my helpless situation seemed to beat at my head with hopeless tears. I was young and tended to be emotional. Moreover, I belonged to a Bengali household where one wasn't used to such demonstration of emotion. And it came from someone I had depended upon as a guardian, in whose sense of propriety I had believed in entirely. If it was necessary to kiss me in order to make my acting more realistic, why wasn't I given the time to prepare myself? (12)

The autobiographizing becomes non-factual in its evading of names, specific contexts or the banner of production. Furthermore, the narrative also talks in terms of what is normal for a 'Bengali household' in its display of affection and what is not. The passage continues to further its need to stay on the privileged side of the argument by adding the following segment: "I asked Jyotishbabu this question. He said, 'If you had been told you wouldn't have agreed to it. It is an experiment. You shouldn't be so touchy. Artists must be more sporting. What ordinary folk can't bring into the imagination comes easily to them and that is why they are artists'" (52). Kanan Devi writes she was not satisfied with this answer. She writes she felt humiliated by the event, in the end. But the explanation on the grounds of artistic necessities renders the system a freedom over the female body that the actresses must concede to. Later in the book when she describes her decision to walk out of a marriage that demanded she abandon her career this streak of abstraction surfaces again. In fact abstraction and falsification of language using an idiom akin to popular fiction is a sustained technique in this pioneer autobiography. Indranee Ghosh notes in the translator's preface: "Language is used here not as it is in the market

place but in literary works. The author confesses that she had wanted to make her life as beautiful as a poem. And so, there is a conscious effort to use a metaphoric style, which can both conceal and reveal experience.” Later, she goes on to say, “Many sentences here tend towards the convoluted and abstruse (as when she describes her first marriage)...” (Ghosh, viii). As Jelinek argues, the form of autobiography in *Homage to All* has an inherent tendency to defy androcentric linearities and certainties, and meander instead of chase a socially valid ambition.

Kanan Devi astutely manages her public persona in the narrative to appeal to the very bhadrak culture that might have excluded her. One major management tactic in self-construction, as referred earlier in the paper, is the autobiography’s general devaluing of cinema at the expense of bhadrak-ish music. She emphasizes her tutelage under musical maestros of the time (like Rai Chand Boral) and her deep engagement with the works of Rabindranath Tagore. This helps her align with the high culture of Bengal in a way her actress-portfolio will not have allowed. This is not to say that Kanan Devi’s music was mere posturing; her musical talent was undeniable. But its framing within her life story was a strategic move to gain cultural capital. She would identify the job in the film industry as ‘dirt and mud’ and the opportunity that music offers as a spirit of freedom. “In the world of dirt and mud”, she writes, “all people endure this disparity, but the yearning of the soul to soar above it and fly can be realized only through imagination.” At another instance, Devi uses abstractions at length to convey what music meant to her. She resorts to the metaphor of a love marriage:

When singing came to stand beside acting, I felt as if I had been united in marriage with one I had longed throughout my life. It brought a breath of fresh air to my insipid, wearying professional life, which seemed to wake up and come alive. (...) The romance of hearing your own voice on record is something I can't describe. I seemed to reacquaint myself with what I was. I had heard a call from deep within. I thought the ‘I’ who

goes to the sets everyday, mouths words parrot-fashion, poses in front of the camera like a puppet, and is humiliated by others, has no connection with me at all. The ‘I’ who wants to rise, who seeks freedom from the throttling misery of daily life to dream of beauty, is the real I who wishes to stand before ‘my love,’ flying on the many-hued wings of ‘his’ compassion and love. Even a moment’s union ‘with him’ drives out bad thoughts; I forget my weariness and find a new impetus to forge ahead. (14)

The passage uses the tone of soft-philosophy, the tone that Indranee Ghosh identifies as metaphoric, convoluted and abstruse, to think about the ‘I’ from a vantage. The fame and scandals from working in the commercial cinema is contrasted with the act of self-involvement in singing. In splitting herself as a love-lorn singer and a weary actress, and in playing down her cinema actress self, she constructs a persona that embodies a form of vernacular respectability. This would mark the self-image building of regional actresses in Indian cinema for the decades to come. She writes: “Those times were not the actress centered times of today. The heroine could not at her will select or reject a role. The director's command was the final word” (51). Her association with cinema and its exploitative regime is gently dismissed so as to project her fascination with music, her (consciously) elevated tastes, and her altruism - all in a bid to gain enough cultural capital that would buy her the respectability that the Bengali high society (including her first marriage) kept her off of.

By the time she became a producer, launching her own banner, Shrimati Pictures, she had completed her transformation from a vulnerable child artist to a powerful industry figure. As she stepped down from the industry, her charity initiative for retired actresses, Mahila Shilpi Mahal, established in 1959, transformed her persona from that of an actress to a more expansive public figure helping thus to cement acceptance and validation that she had dreamt of in her initial days. The autobiography is the

final act in this process of self-creation. In writing her own life, she preempts and overwrites the narratives constructed about her by the media and public gossip. She seizes the pen, performs her own story, and in doing so, solidifies a legacy on her own terms. Her "homage to all" is a gesture of magnanimity from a position of achieved power, a testament to her navigation of the treacherous waters of class and gender in Indian cinema.

While Kanan Devi's life became a text of self-authored success and assimilation, P.K. Rosy's is a study in violent, enforced silence. Born into the Pulaya community, considered "untouchable" in the rigid caste hierarchy of early 20th-century Travancore, Rosy was already a transgressor by being a stage performer. Her casting as the female lead, an upper-caste Nair woman named Sarojini, in J.C. Daniel's *Vigathakumaran*, was an unprecedented challenge to the social order. At the film's premiere at the Capitol Theatre in Trivandrum, the reaction was not cinematic critique but caste-based fury. When a scene depicted the hero placing a flower in Sarojini's hair, the upper-caste audience erupted in rage at the audacity of a Dalit woman portraying a Nair, and at the perceived intimacy of the act. The screen was torn, the theatre vandalized, and Rosy was reportedly chased from the venue. This event was not merely a case of a hostile audience; it was the violent rupture of the symbolic order. Rosy's performance was seen as a contamination of the social fabric. Meena T Pillai calls Rosy's (lack of a) story, a "symbolic annihilation."⁴ This means she was not just driven out of her home and the film industry; she was systematically erased from the historical and cultural memory of Malayalam cinema for decades.

The aftermath of the screening was brutal. Her home was allegedly burned, and she was forced to flee. Leading an anonymous life married to a lorry driver, her identity as an actress was completely erased and un-inquired till she passed away in 1988. She did not act in any other film. There is no record of her own words, no memoir, no interview. Her life story is a void, a testament to the break-down of speech

in certain contexts. The "autobiographical pact" was impossible for her because her very existence as a subject was denied by the dominant culture. Unlike Devi, she could not think of herself as an "I" who could narrate her life; she was an object of revulsion, expelled and forgotten. The rediscovery of her story, initiated by the research of Kunnukuzhi S. Mani in the 1970s and carried forward by Dalit intellectuals and film collectives like the Women in Cinema Collective (which named its film society after her), is an act of counter-memory. It is an attempt to write the autobiography that Rosy could not; an autobiography authored by other selves that empathise and enquire. Her life, as it is now told, is a powerful critique of the foundational myths of Malayalam cinema and a stark reminder of the casteist violence that underpins Indian social history.

Chronologically Kanan Devi and Rosy were women who entered Indian filmdom almost simultaneously. Devi's debut film *Joydev* was released in 1926 and Rosy's debut happened in 1928. But while Devi's association with the banner of Madan pictures successfully continued, Rosy was erased, and everyone associated with the film spiralled down to social exclusion and impecuniness. Female agency in early Indian cinema, in this regard may be seen as a function of caste-patriarchy defined locally. Kanan Devi's agency is manifest in her ability to author her own text, to control her narrative, and to build a lasting legacy. Her struggles were immense, but they were struggles *within* the system, which she ultimately learned to master. Rosy's story is one of absolute voicelessness. Her agency was extinguished in a single, violent act, leaving her unable to narrate her own experience. Kanan Devi's narrative carefully lays an upward trajectory of social mobility for her as an artist and as a person. She is seen to have transcended her origins to become an icon. Rosy's story is one of annihilation. Her attempt at professional and symbolic mobility resulted in her complete ostracization and erasure. It could be seen that both women faced prejudice. However, Kanan Devi faced the class-and-gender based prejudice of the *bhadralok*, which, while

⁴ Pillai, Meena T. "P.K. Rosy's story: When a Dalit woman played an upper caste character in Malayalam cinema." *The Indian*

Express, 10 Feb. 2023.

formidable, could be navigated through the acquisition of a certain degree of cultural capital and professional success. P.K. Rosy faced the unyielding structural violence of caste. For her, there was no room for negotiation; her identity itself was the transgression, leading not to censure but to expulsion.

Kanan Devi's autobiography memorializes her life - it establishes her as a pioneer, a model and a civilian par excellence. P.K. Rosy is memorialized by others, in a posthumous act of political and historical reclamation. She becomes a symbol for Dalit and feminist movements, and her story a powerful tool for critique - not just of caste but also, in this specific case, the agency to imagine an autobiography. Kanan Devi's memory is a product of her own making. Rosy's memory is a testament to her unmaking. P.K. Rosy is a stark reminder that for some, the stage was not a space of opportunity but a site of danger, and the camera not a tool of immortalization but a catalyst for erasure. Her unwritten life exposes the limits of agency when confronted with the absolute violence of social hierarchy. Reading Devi and Rosy together complicates any simple narrative of self-actualisation for women in Indian cinema. It reveals a landscape of stratified opportunities, where the ability to create a "celluloid self"—and, more importantly, to narrate it—was a privilege granted to a select few, while others were cast out of the frame, their stories left for archaeology to recover. The homage must indeed be to all, especially to those who, like P.K. Rosy were never allowed to receive one in their lifetime.

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